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OO RUEHGI RUEHMA RUEHROV  
DE RUEHKH #1735 3371057  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
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FM AMEMBASSY KHARTOUM  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 2444  
INFO RUCNFUR/DARFUR COLLECTIVE  
RUCNIAD/IGAD COLLECTIVE  
RHMFISS/CJTF HOA

UNCLAS KHARTOUM 001735

DEPT FOR AF A/S FRAZER, SE WILLIAMSON, AF/SPG  
NSC FOR PITTMAN AND HUDSON  
ADDIS ABABA FOR USAU  
DEPT PLS PASS USAID FOR AFR/SUDAN

SENSITIVE  
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: ASEC PGOV PREL KPAO KPKO SOCI AU UNSC SU

SUBJECT: NEWSPAPER CENSORSHIP IN KHARTOUM - A CASE STUDY

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Since the beginning of the year, censorship of Khartoum-based newspapers has increased dramatically. Below is the account of Suleiman Al-Amin, a popular columnist with "Al-Sudani," a publication that has seen its share of harassment and censorship recently. Al-Amin described the silencing of media in Khartoum as part of a cyclical pattern by the Sudanese regime, but noted that the latest actions of exerting control are the most extreme he has seen in years. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) Suleiman Al-Amin, a recent participant in the International Visitor Leadership Program (where he covered the U.S. presidential debate in Oxford, Mississippi) has seen his last two columns completely stricken from publication. The first, originally to be published on November 24, was about student elections at the University of Khartoum. The second, planned for publication on November 30, was ironically about his previous column being censored. (Sensing this would happen, Al-Amin said that he wrote it with the censors in mind as part of his audience.)

¶3. (SBU) Al-Amin believes the censoring of his last two columns shows that the Government of Sudan has lost its legitimacy. "Like a fish when the water runs out the drain," Al-Amin sees the increased level of censorship at newspapers across the political spectrum in Khartoum as an "act of desperation." According to Al-Amin, for the past two months, when authorities come to the offices of the newspapers at 9pm each night to review the next day's edition, they now bring three censors instead of one, "just to make sure." On a more personal level, Al-Amin has been harassed at work and at home by prying security officials over the past year, and says his daughter (who is studying law at university in Khartoum) has been threatened as well.

¶4. (SBU) Scrutiny at "Al-Sudani" has been particularly harsh since the paper reported in February 2008 that the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) had supplied approximately 300 Toyota trucks to Chadian rebels to assist in their siege on N'Djamena. However, it appears that the tightened screws of censorship extend across the aisles in Khartoum. According to Al-Amin, "Al-Intibaha," the frothily Islamist, pro-GoS newspaper, also gets regular visits from security officials. When asked about the prospect that a new media law might improve the situation for journalists in Sudan, Al-Amin laughed and commented that "law is just a decoration for the government right now. Until elections, there will be no real toleration of criticism."

¶5. (SBU) COMMENT: What the U.S. Embassy has heard over the past several weeks from Al-Amin is very similar to anecdotal evidence passed from other reporters and columnists throughout the past year. The Khartoum regime appears to be switching from its carrot methodology to the stick approach in its treatment of journalists, with tactics ranging from increased editorial scrutiny to mass-arrests in advance of a new Press Law which should end such practices. Even if the draft media law that is currently before

Parliament is approved in one form or another, we expect continued harassment and censorship - perhaps with some symbolic gestures to feign improvement - primarily for the consumption of the international community.

FERNANDEZ